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AUTHOR Jenkins, Linda Walsh
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ABSTRACT

American theatre history should include a study of Native American performances, since these performances are rich with "American" symbolic materials such as imagery, symbols, and heraldic visions of animals and landscapes. Indian cultures understood the importance of performance for both the visionary and the community at large. Even the pow-wow contains structural elements familiar to Westerners, from vaudeville to Robert Wilson, from circus to opera, from rodeo to Twyla Tharp. Unfortunately, theatre scholarship has refused to call Indian theatre "theatre," in part because of a cultural bias against Indians. The contemporary Indians who are trying to create theatre need access to the written history of Native American performance. For the most part, they know what has been passed along orally in their own tribes and what has been recorded by anthropologists, neither of which provides a "theatre" perception. As a result, many of them have the bias that their traditional performances have nothing whatsoever to do with theatre. But Native American performances are indigenous to this continent and deserve a place in American theatre studies, not just as a bit of exotica, but as a form to value and to utilize in trying to understand how performance interacts with cultures in transition. (HOD)

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Linda Walsh Jenkins

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HISTORIOGRAPHY, AMERICAN THEATRE, AND THE FIRST AMERICANS

I want us to see Native American performance as a means by which we can more fully understand theatre itself and the relationship of performance to culture, not just as an "added on" chapter in American theatre. I agreed to speak today because I want to speak to the notion of consensus itself, as well as to the goals of theatre history and the traditional approach to American theatre. I will use references to Native American performance to illustrate how I believe it helps us adjust our field and cultural definitions.

In challenging the consensus theory we are not challenging the notion that "what is important" in theatre history is something arrived at through a consensus of scholars. In its ideal form, that is the most democratic notion of history the world has ever known. The history of history tells us that in the past individuals (almost always male, world-wide, through time) have been appointed by kings or chiefs or self-appointed through visions to be historians; sometimes the culture has demanded a rose-colored publicity package and sometimes it has demanded a brutal truth-telling. But the idea that a group of scholars would

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somehow democratically arrive at a consensus is new and probably should be applauded.

The challenge comes as we look at WHO comprises this collective and HOW they've agreed on WHY we do theatre history at all. When we know the answers to those questions we can better critique WHAT they choose to emphasize. If we want to change the what, we have to change the who and the why. In critiquing who forms the collective we have to ask questions such as where and how are these people recruited and trained, what are they taught is important, how are they permitted access to the power to decide what is important, where are they employed, how are they allowed to pursue their research?

I believe that behind the who and the what is the most crucial question: Why? To what end theatre research? I quote from Prof. Brockett's HISTORY a statement of purpose which dominates the field: "The purpose of theatre history is to describe and explain the theatre as it has existed at specific times and places and to trace its successive changes. Like other branches of history, it seeks to provide a record of the past; in addition, it explores the causes and significance of events and seeks to set them in the appropriate artistic, intellectual, social, and economic context, and to relate them to the total development of the theatre." (p. 719) This is a perfectly reasonable statement of purpose.

But for me the focus on theatre itself as an end is too narrow, too self-centered. I suggest that theatre history finally needs to lead us to understandings about human culture as it

reveals crucial information about the relationship of performance to culture. For support I turn to two other historians. One is the old timer himself, the most radical in Western history, Thucydides. When Thucydides chose to write about the Peloponnesian War it was not out of a commitment to recording the history of the war or to understand war per se, so much as it was out of the Athenian commitment to use the particular to grasp something larger. Through the account of Thucydides we are led to reflect on the nature of power, demagoguery, and revolution as they are part of the essence of male political behavior. For my other philosopher of history I move to the present and remind you of a speech given by Helen Krich Chinoy to the American Society for Theatre Research in 1979. She suggested that the new technologies such as film, video, tape, and computers have led to change in what we study: "Our emphasis will become more comparative and 'interdisciplinary' because we will be in a position to trace cultural variations and behavior patterns."

It is in this context of using particulars to arrive at essentials and being comparative and interdisciplinary that I wish to place Native American performance studies. There surely can be do doubt that the United States is a grand experiment in cultural pluralism. If our goal for American theatre history is to further our understanding of the essentials of American culture, not just theatre per se, then it seems to me imperative that we study the variety of performance traditions that have thrived on this land. A theatre history that obscures American pluralism is of limited use not only to theatre practitioners but also to other students

and scholars of American culture.

Let me refer you to an article, "Native American Theatre," by Jeffrey F. Huntsman, in Maxine Schwartz Seller's ETHNIC THEATRE IN THE UNITED STATES. Huntsman provides an excellent survey, analysis and bibliography. Note that his background is in linguistics and literature; his appointment is in English, at Indiana. The field of American literature has for some time recognized the creations of Indians as a part of that field, and it is to Huntsman's credit that he has understood "literature" in the broad context of performance. I suggest that literary studies and literary history have a broader vision than that of theatre studies. We might take a cue from this sister discipline as we try to define a broader role for theatre research.

Given that preamble, I would like now to review for you some of the ways that Native American performance research helps me think about theatre and culture, primarily but not entirely American culture.

For those of us who are not Indian, consider the value of the perspective of the "outsider." C. G. Jung, (in MEMORIES, DREAMS, REFLECTIONS, p. 246), after a visit with Pueblo Indians observed:

> We always require an outside point to stand on, in order to apply the lever of criticism. . . . How . . . can we become conscious of national peculiarities if we have never had the opportunity to regard our own nation from outside?

Examining Indian performance and the cultures which spawn

them and which it feeds gives the non-Indian an extraordinary non-Western and yet thoroughly American vantage point, a "distanced" perspective Brecht would have applauded.

Native performances are rich with "American" symbolic materials that we celebrate in the work of playwrights such as Sam Shepard: imagery, symbols, heraldic visions of animals and landscapes. The poetic material of their performances, the costumes, masks and dances all draw from the landscape of this continent and so feed my own dream landscape.

Indian performance continually names, celebrates, suggests paradoxes about the relationship of the human community to the land, the seasons, the other life of this continent. This is a perspective we sorely need in view of our contemporary political situation, created, it seems to me, by a people who have lost their minds because they've divorced their bodies from the earth itself.

From the position of the outsider I see American cultures that value the visions of their people. That was my first important personal point of contact with Native American performance: I was drawn to those tribes who believed visions should be realized in performance, should be honored, should be given form without regard for commercial potential. Those cultures understood the importance of performance for both the visionary and the community at large, an understanding which sometimes seems superior to that of my own "advanced" civilization, in which the determinant of the "power" of a vision so often is its ability to sell tickets.

In every Indian culture I have examined (and there were hundreds, with an astonishing array of variables), performance is understood as an essential part of the fabric of community. The individual who envisions may stand out, but the relationship of individual to community (and to sacred mysteries) is what is emphasized by event. We and our students might be well served by studying this relationship and valuing it as an American tradition.

We like to say Western performance is secular, but then we have our highest regard for those dramas and events that move our souls in mysterious ways, that name paradoxes, that enact the unspeakable, that lead us to the truths of the human spirit. Is this really so different from traditional Native performances? We may be harming ourselves by insisting on such a difference between ourselves and "primitive" people.

This "outsider" stance can help us look in new ways at tribal aspects of the Greeks, Western culture's dramatic "forefathers." Jung noted that the Pueblos' sense of secrecy about their sacred performances gave him

> an inkling of Eleusis, whose secret was known to one nation and yet never betrayed. I understood what Pausanias or Herodotus felt when he wrote: 'I am not permitted to name the name of that god.'

I look at masked choruses in the Pacific Northwest and see men enacting bees or whales, then I look at Aristophanes' animal choruses and the whole satyr tradition with a fresh view. The Athenians of the 5th and 6th century who danced as wasps or goats

were not somehow elevated, chosen people, while the 19th century Kwakiutl whale dancers were savages who had not conceived of intellectual thought. In both cases we see complex cultures celebrating the reciprocal relationships between men and animals, in both comic and serious ways.

As a student of feminist theory, another "outsider" perspective, I am greatly aided by studying tribal performances. Indian theatre emphasizes the familial and communal and so is often what feminists call "female" in its structure and goals.

I reflect, then, on one possible reason for the Western disregard for Indian culture: It's too "feminine" for the highly masculine-preferring West. When the West has paid attention to Indian traditions, it usually has been to the more "masculine" or violent events such as human sacrifice in Central America or war dances, skin piercing in Sun dances, buffalo dances. All those events are seen outside of communal context, and the more "feminine" events that bond and celebrate are usually ignored.

I'm suggesting a relationship between misogyny in American culture and the derogation and containment of Indians. Male-dominated America likes the "idea" of Indians much as it likes the ideas of motherhood and Marilyn Monroe, but it is in practice highly fearful and contemptuous of female tradition.

Theatre scholarship may have refused to call Indian theatre "theatre" in part out of this cultural bias against Indians and the government's concerted official policy to exterminate Native cultural practices. We need to examine that in ourselves; how

much have we been socialized to disregard Indian cultures?

In another vein related to feminist studies, I can see across Indian cultures divisions between what males are allowed and what females are allowed in performance. Males generally take the more public and elaborate events, though there are exceptions according to tribe. This helps me see how cultures differentiate gender behavior and engender performance expectations.

As the Greek males elaborated public performance while females were contained in private, so the Indians. And the same pattern, in large part, has prevailed through Western culture. It's the public/private dichotomy that is important here, quite aside from any considerations of misogyny or oppression of women. This helps me understand how a culture can be female-honoring and at the same time deny females the public forum for performance.

The contemporary Indians who are trying to create theatre (and film, television, radio) need to have access to the written history of Native performance. For the most part, they know what has been passed along orally in their own tribes and what has been recorded by anthropologists, neither of which is a "theatre" perspective. As a result, many of them have the bias that their traditional performances have nothing whatsoever to do with theatre. If they study theatre in college, they find no reason to challenge that bias. The young Indian actor or playwright is bereft of a rich and ancient tradition. He or she picks up a text in American theatre and finds nothing of Indian heritage from which to draw.

They also need for their teachers and those funding agencies which take an interest in them to know something about their cultural ways. Attempts at Indian theatre over the past decade have been aborted in part by this cultural gap. The more Indians can behave like white people, the better their chances for money; this defeats the idea of nurturing a truly Indian theatre. There has been little or no effort at cultural education on the part of people with money to invest in developing Indian theatre and media work. MacNeil Lowry attempted to aid Indian theatre through the Ford Foundation, to his lasting credit; but even he was baffled by the cultural differences for which he was educationally unprepared.

When Indians can't learn their own histories and non-Indians can't grasp Native cultural patterns, we have the situation we have today: a dearth of Indian theatre and film work in spite of many talented artists, in spite of people with visions. When I have tried to talk about this with some people in positions of power in the Endowments and TCG, I have met with a denial of the problem, a refusal to admit that "we" might have something to learn in order to help "them" learn.

Finally, let me take a few minutes to comment on a Native American theatre form which is thriving today across the United States. Most peope think of traditional sacred events when they think of American Indian performance. The pow-wow, however, is for me one of the most intriguing events in American culture, and

yet it remains virtually unknown to Americans who diligently study eighteenth century British comedy. It is clearly secular and while its origins lie in older traditions, its present form is one created in this century to meet the exigencies of the reservation system and the traumatic changes in Indian life.

Every pow-wow is different. Usually there is a master of ceremonies who narrates as he announces events and tells jokes and stories. While there are many old dances, they are interpreted anew by each dancer, each time they are danced. Similarly the old songs. At the same time, there are new songs introduced at each pow-wow.

There are competitions between individuals and between choruses, and there are group participation events, an alternation of agon and bonding. There are costumes and masks, impersonations, protocol for rehearsal and performance. There are professionals and amateurs.

The people who are performing are not primitive savages; a man may run his own business during the week, then dance in traditional Comanche style on the weekend. In some events, everyone, young and old, dances together. Other events separately feature male, female, children, teenagers and adults, as well as traditional and new styles.

The pow-wow contains structural elements familiar to Westerners from vaudeville to Robert Wilson, from circus to opera, from rodeo to Twyla Tharp, from ceilis to performance art. It is a 20th century theatrical form, performed year round all over the country, although most extensively and intensely in the Southwest

and West during the summer months.

It is thoroughly indigenous to this continent, a continually evolving form, utilizing new technology from microphones to video portapaks. It deserves a place in American theatre studies, not just as a bit of exotica but as a form to value and to utilize in trying to understand how performance interacts with cultures in transition.

In conclusion, I urge us all to believe that being more inclusive and pluralistic in our notions of American theatre is not a dry academic issue or simply a kneejerk liberal idea. Failure to acknowledge and embrace the performances of Americans other than those of the dominant culture (mainly males) impoverishes American culture, limits our capacity for self-reflection, denies full artistic expression to people of vision who might help us survive, continues the oppression of those excluded, and makes our field a narrowly self-serving one that has little to offer to any other field, much less to the evolution of the national psyche.